

## TEST THE SPIRITS

(SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2014)

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Scripture reading – Deut. 13; 1 John 4:1-6

### INTRODUCTION

I want to begin with a listing of 8 dangerous heresies that cover much of the history of the church.

1) Adoptionism – taught by Theodotus of Byzantium and Paul of Samosata.

Jesus was just a mere man, adopted by the Father and became the Son of God.

2) Arianism – taught by Arius.

Denial of the true divinity of Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was created by the Father.

3) Docetism

Jesus' physical body was just an illusion; he was a completely pure spirit.

4) Sabellianism – taught by Noetus of Smyrna and Sabellius.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are just different manifestations of one God rather than three distinct persons. Also known as modalism.

5) Marcionism – taught by Marcion.

Rejection of the OT. The wrathful God portrayed in the OT is not the true, loving God of the NT.

6) Montanism – taught by Montanus.

This group believed that their own prophecies superseded and fulfilled the doctrines taught by the apostles along with other strange beliefs.

7) Jehovah Witnesses – founded by Charles Taze Russell

Denial of the Trinity; Jesus is the first thing God created as Michael the Archangel.

8) Mormonism – founded by Joseph Smith.

No Trinity; man becomes God; Jesus was the spirit child between God and Mary.

When you study the NT and also church history, you see that Christians always are tempted by false teaching.

Churches and individual Christians must always be awake and vigilant.

It has been a while since I visited Salt Lake City and the HQ of the Mormon Empire. I still remember meeting a woman who worked at the Visitor Center who said she used to be a Baptist before she joined the Mormon church.

I am sure that this story could be total countless times.

In two weeks, I plan to start a new series in the book of Colossians.

Before that I wanted to cover a portion of 1 John as we give special attention to the doctrine of Jesus Christ around this time of the year.

There are several key themes in 1 John – who is Jesus Christ and what has He commanded us to do?

It is thought that John wrote his letters perhaps not long before the closing of the NT canon. Even if thirty years or more passed after the time of Christ, this time difference in no way kept him from powerfully communicating what Jesus taught him and the other disciples.

As we read this letter, it is important to keep in mind the Apostle John, the one who leaned on Jesus at the supper, the disciple whom Jesus loved.

1 John 4 can be divided into two major parts.

Verses 1-6 give instruction related to false prophets and teachers.

Verses 7-21 focus on the command of Christians to love.

You see how essential this chapter is for the life of individual Christians and the life of local churches and the visible church.

**Do not believe everything you hear or see, but carefully examine everything.**

From these 6 verses I want to emphasize 8 main points.

1) **Do not believe every spirit but carefully examine them to see if they are of God.**

This is the main command of these verses.

Christians must not be naïve and simply believe what another person says even if that person claims to be speaking the truth.

Why does John speak of spirits?

Look at the final two verses of chapter 3.

**1 John 3:23** And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

**24** Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

Believers have the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we are assured of who we are in Jesus Christ.

It is through the Holy Spirit that we are assured of the truth of God's Word.

It is through the Holy Spirit that we then are able to speak and faithfully share the truth of God's Word with others.

However, not everyone who claims to have the Holy Spirit or to speak according to the Holy Spirit is being honest.

One commentator writes:

So behind every prophet is a spirit, and behind each spirit either God or the devil. Before we can trust any spirits, we must test them.<sup>1</sup>

In 1 Cor. 12:10, Paul writes that one of the spiritual gifts that God gives to some believers is the ability to discern spirits.

Some in a special way have the gift of discernment.

Here, the command of John is given to all believers.

Every believer is given this warning and command.

John Calvin comments very well that there is both a private duty and a public duty for this command.

Every individual Christian must follow this command for the sake of his own conscience and faith.

This does not mean that every believer will speak for a local church much less the entire visible church. Church leaders have both a private and public duty in terms of testing spirits and teaching.

Things that are new tend to be more exciting.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Letter of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 19; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 153.

Nearly every product sold today is advertised as being new, exciting, something you have to have.

This relates also to how many things are marketed to Christians in terms of books and teaching.

It is not that we automatically must reject anything we have not heard before.

The command is to test, to carefully examine.

Increasingly we live in an age that doesn't seek to test anything.

Today it is almost as if John wrote, "Beloved, accept every spirit and don't bother to really care about truth. What is most important is to be tolerant of everything."

For children there is great importance in learning the truth now so that you are well acquainted with God's truth as you get older.

## **2) Many false prophets have gone into the world.**

The warning and instruction here in chapter 4 is similar to that found in chapter 2.

**1John 2:18** Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. **19** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

The false prophets John warns us about are primarily those who claim to be Christians not those from other religions.

It is true that there are professed Christians who convert to Islam or Hinduism and other false religions.

The greater danger for Christians is to be led astray by those who claim to still be part of the true Church.

And we can say that this goes back to the very beginning of temptation.

Satan deceived Eve concerning the Word of God.

Satan continues to try to tempt and deceive Christians through a twisting and perversion of the truth.

The most dangerous false prophets are those who grew up in Christian churches and families.

This is what we see from the NT and from church history.

Already in the era of the Apostles themselves there were many false prophets who caused enormous trouble for the true church. And this has been the record of all of church history.

### **3) A key test: Confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.**

John in these brief verses is obviously not dealing with every false belief or teaching.

John's warning focuses on the heart of the Christian faith and the true understanding of who Jesus Christ is.

Many of the heresies of the past and today directly relate a proper understanding of Jesus Christ.

Turn if you would to 1 John 1.

**1John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— **2** the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—

These opening verses express the amazing truth that the eternal Son of God took on human flesh so that he could be heard, seen, and handled.

### **Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.**

There is some question about the best way to translate and interpret this phrase in verse 2.

John Calvin wrote that in this simple phrase there are three key truths that are essential for belief.

First, the reference to Jesus coming points to His eternal nature as the Son of God. He came from the Father.

**John 1:1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God.

Second, the reference to flesh points to the miracle of the incarnation.

The Son of God added to His divine person and nature a real, human nature.

Jesus has a real, physical body. He is our brother, like us in all things yet without sin.

Third, the reference to coming speaks of the very specific purpose why the Son of God took on human flesh.

He came so that His blood might cleanse us from all sin.

He came to satisfy God's justice and turn away His deserved wrath from us.

He came so that we might enjoy true fellowship with the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This then is one of the key ways we must test whether a teaching is truly coming through the Holy Spirit or is the doctrine of demons.

#### **4) A rejection of this confession shows the spirit is not of God.**

Can there be differences among Christians related to what we believe?

We must admit that there can be some differences.

Obviously this does not mean that all belief on every point is equally true.

We disagree with our Baptist brothers regarding the sacrament of Baptism.

We disagree with our Lutheran brothers regarding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

We disagree with those in the Reformed tradition who teach Two Kingdom Theology.

We disagree with dispensational Christians regarding prophecy and end time matters.

But anyone who rejects the truth concerning Jesus Christ is not a brother.

Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons are not our brothers who just disagree with us on a few issues.

This is why I think Glenn Beck is a very dangerous person.

He says much about politics we could agree with him concerning. But as a Mormon, he has incredible influence and for this reason I think he is very dangerous because of what the Mormon faith says about Jesus.

If you visit one of the key Mormon websites, Mormon.org you will see them in a very deceptive way presenting what they say they believe about Jesus.

On the surface it appears to be in agreement with Scripture. They quote from the Bible.

In fact, if you know very little about Jesus Christ and the Word of God, you would not be able to see the great error in the Mormon faith.

And this is why they have been so very successful in leading millions and millions of people astray.

### **5) There was already a spirit of antichrist at the time John was writing.**

There is a question among Christians concerning whether there is a single person who is to be identified as the “Antichrist.”

Are we waiting for some person to be identified as the “Antichrist”?

John Calvin and many others in the Reformed tradition have identified the Antichrist with the pope and the Roman Catholic Church in its many perversions.

I am not going to seek to address all the different ideas present here, but we should take note of two things.

First, with John and his original readers we are part of the **last hour** as we see from 1 John 2:18.

How can this be when it has been almost two thousand years since that time?

The answer is that for John and for us, we live in light of the glorious return of Jesus Christ. And while waiting for His glorious return we must be constantly vigilant and aware of those who are against the truth of our Lord.

Second, the spirit of antichrist was present in the first century just as it is present in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This is why this text will never be irrelevant for the true Church of Jesus Christ.

### **6) Our identity and victory is related to who we are in God and His presence among us.**

What is the hope for God’s people in the midst of false teaching and antichrists?

At the heart of our hope is the truth of verse 4.

Here we recognize that although we are called to be vigilant and to test the spirits, we recognize that it is God who is the source of life for His church.

John says to us, “You are of God.”

In saving union with the Lord Jesus Christ, we have a new identity as being of God.

**John 8:47** He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.”

**1John 5:4** For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

The language of verse 4 speaks to our being born again or being born from above.

The language of little children is a term that was first used by Jesus for His disciples in John 13:33.

**John 13:33** Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, “Where I am going, you cannot come,’ so now I say to you.

The term little children reminds us again of our weakness. Who are we to stand against powerful heresies?

And yet as little children there is the announcement of victory and the assurance of God’s powerful presence with us and in us.

The New Bible Commentary writes:

This short letter has the verb ‘to overcome’ six times, which is more than any other NT book other than Revelation (seventeen times); the note of victory is unusually prominent. Here the verb is in the perfect tense, which shows that the victory is more than a passing phase; it is decisive and continuing.

Heretics exist but they do not have the final say. It is the bride of Christ that will have the victory.

**7) It is not a surprise that false teachers are loved by the world.**



This is what we see in verse 5.

False teachers are identified as being of the world.

They may at one time have claimed to be part of the true church, but they have shown their true identity as being of the world.

Now being of the world does have its perks.

False teachers are often loved and praised by the world.

This is a vital truth.

The world is not the basis of truth.

It is not scientific polls that forms the basis for truth.

The world loves to hear its own truth constantly. Do not let this discourage you.

### **8) Another key test: He who knows God will submit to the truth of God's Word.**

Who is the **we** of verse 6?

It is possible that John is speaking of himself and other apostles.

This is how John writes in chapter 1 at least.

Even if John is including his readers including us in this declaration, there must be an understanding that hearing us has an objective basis – God's inspired and preserved Word.

Only as Christians stand with the truth of God's Word should we and must we also be heard.

Here then we have two related truths.

- 1) There is a clear standard for truth.
- 2) There is a final standard for truth that will not be replaced or added to in the future.

Many false teachers claim that they believe the Bible. But this is a very deceptive claim in that they say that God has given to them further revelation that stands equal to God's truth.

This is the great error of the Mormon church and also of the Roman Catholic church in that they add either tradition or additional revelation to the truth of the gospel and the Word of God.

There is a vital role for confessions and documents that express what a church or denomination believe about God's Word and truth.

These confessions must stand under the authority of God's Word or else there is danger of falling into the same error as heretics and the cults.

**Conclusion:**

The Christian church must constantly stand for truth and demonstrate true love.

John emphasizes the first of these here in verses 1-6 and deals with love in 7-21.

It is possible that churches are very vigilant in terms of the first duty and lack when it comes to the second.

This we see was the testimony of the church in Ephesus. They were faithful in keeping doctrine pure but were judged with respect to having lost their first love.

May God be pleased to bless us by convicting us when we lack in either of these two great duties.

Truth and love are the heart of what we need to ensure our children learn from us.

Amen.

**Closing Hymn: 116**

**BENEDICTION – 2 COR. 13:11, 14**

Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit *be* with you all. Amen.